

Whether to stick with SALT II

Reagan officials are split as the administration faces key decision on much-disputed arms treaty

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Washington

Another battle looms over SALT II.

For years the unratified treaty has been the orphan of arms control. But it remains essentially in force because the nuclear superpowers have agreed not to undercut it.

Now the Reagan administration is wrestling with a decision over whether to stick within the limits of SALT II — or breach it by measures designed to compensate for alleged Soviet violations of the pact.

The decision must be made soon. The eighth Trident submarine, the USS Nevada, begins sea trials May 20. This will put the US over the total limit of 1,200 multiple-warhead missile launchers unless it decides to dismantle two older Poseidon submarines.

Last June when a similar situation arose, President Reagan — under pressure from Congress and US allies — opted to continue to comply with the 1979 treaty. The US-Soviet summit meeting was on the horizon and there was no desire to roil the waters on the SALT II issue.

As the internal debate intensifies, several factors foreshadow an even tougher struggle this time around:

- The Senate last year voted overwhelmingly to urge compliance with the treaty. But now a key player has shifted sides. Senate majority leader Robert Dole (R) of Kansas joined 23 other senators in a letter to the President urging him not to dismantle the Poseidons. The Senate is still expected to favor keeping SALT II, but the margin of support will be smaller.

- The President now has a national-security adviser, Vice-Adm. John M. Poindexter, who is more conservative politically. (His predecessor, Robert C. McFarlane, moderated internal disputes and helped move the President toward the center on this issue.) There appears to be even less consensus within the administration than last June.

- The NATO foreign ministers are not due to meet until after the presidential decision and therefore will not weigh in with their collective view. Last May they endorsed continued compliance with the treaty.

The issue is complicated by the fact that the President must act on a report from the Pentagon late in 1985 recommending various US "proportionate responses" to the alleged Soviet violations of SALT II. The administration continues to be deeply divided on the issue.

The Defense Department favors dry-docking the Poseidon submarines for a year before deciding whether to refurbish them and send them out to sea. It also proposes replacing the single-warhead Minuteman II missiles with three-warhead Minuteman III missiles. These actions would put the US in violation of the pact.

The State Department is squarely opposed to undermining the treaty, viewing it as an essential component of long-term US-Soviet relations and important to keeping arms control alive. According to US officials, the State Department is therefore advocating measures consistent with the agreement, such as producing more B-1 bombers, encrypting telemetry from US missile tests, and proceeding with the Midgetman program.

Ironically, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and professional military officers favor abiding by the SALT II limits. If the US undercuts the pact, the Soviet Union is seen to be in a better position to benefit from the move, in part because its production lines remain open. According to some estimates, the Soviets could add up to 12,000 new warheads by the mid-1990s.

Treaty supporters also argue that, if the US dry-docks rather than dismantles the two Poseidons, the Soviets could begin "dry-docking" their ICBM silos, which

could be quickly reactivated. They could also start dry-docking their submarines instead of dismantling them and keeping their bombers more capable.

But conservatives in the administration are pressing for a response to the purported treaty violations. It is contended, for instance, that the Soviets have introduced two new types of land-based missiles, the SS-24 and SS-25. Only one new missile is permitted under SALT II. But the Soviets say the SS-25 is a permitted modernization of the SS-13. The question remains in dispute.

The administration also accuses Moscow of encoding missile test-flight data needed for verification purposes. But the US has refused to specify how verification is

impeded, because it does not want to compromise its intelligence sources.

Another allegation is that the Soviets have exceeded the SALT limits by not dismantling many of their bombers. Critics say that there are no mutually agreed upon procedures for dismantling bombers, and the Soviet bombers (called Bisons) are not in fact operational.

Lawmakers in Congress are mounting an effort to persuade the President not to undercut the SALT II pact. Rep. Les Aspin (D) of Wisconsin, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, this week issued a study showing that Soviet strategic weapons could grow by 65 percent by the end of 1989, compared with 45 percent for the US, if the treaty is scrapped.

Also, says Congressman Aspin, Soviet missiles have more spare room inside their nose cones and so the Soviets could more than double the number of warheads without adding any new missiles — a move that would further complicate the President's antimissile defense program. Soviet violations of SALT II are "politically harmful," said Aspin, because they undermine US support for arms control. But in military terms, he said, "they don't amount to a hill of beans."

In the Senate, four members have introduced a resolution calling on the President to reaffirm his policy of abiding by the SALT II limits as long as the Soviets do so also. Sponsors of the bipartisan resolution are Democratic Sens. Dale Bumpers of Arkansas and Patrick J. Leahy of Vermont and Republicans John H. Chafee of Rhode Island and John Heinz of Pennsylvania.

The lawmakers argue that the SALT I and II agreements have placed important restraints on Soviet nuclear forces. Citing government data, they say the Soviet Union has dismantled more than 500 operational missile launchers to stay within the SALT I and SALT II treaty limits. The US has dismantled 16.